

## Essay

# My Life in Crime

**A**s far back as I can remember, I have always been a ward of what we call “The System.” Even in my preteen years I was involved in illegal activities,

with the encouragement of my parents as well as other family members and immoral influences. I was never a stable child, moving from city to city as a result of my parents’ financial problems. However, to be honest, I never considered this to be a disadvantage. In fact, I credit this misfortune as being nothing more than a learning experience for me! I truly believe that this is why I can adapt in different environments and communicate with all different types of people. In the same vein, while I believe that my upbringing was outlandish and unjustifiable, I have come to see that you can always learn something positive through negativity. This has led me to reflect on “my life in crime.”

My first arrest for a serious crime (armed robbery) took place in Sacramento when I was 15. I robbed a pizza man and was detained for six months. At that age, I was too naïve to grasp the full concept of incarceration. Rather than using the time to come to peace with myself and change my self-destructive ways, I spent it doing push-ups and sit-ups. After all, I felt that my first time being locked up was just “earning stripes,” a term I had become familiar with while growing up in the ‘hood.

After I was released, my friends treated me with a lot more respect, and at the time, their attitude toward me just confirmed my way of thinking. As I look back and reflect on my childish ways, I realize that my main intentions were to improve physically, in order to be easily accepted by my peers. I also realize that this is a problem that plagues the world. So many people try to make themselves look better on the outside to be accepted, but who is really at fault here? The people who want acceptance, or the people who they want to impress? People are so caught up with appearance that they fail to deal with themselves internally—like myself, for instance!

As a result of not learning a constructive lesson from incarceration, I was destined to return to juvenile hall. Four months later is when fate caught up with me for the second time. I served my first lengthy bid in the San Francisco juvenile facility, and it was there that I began to recognize and

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Evans Lowry, 17, recently moved from the San Francisco Youth Guidance Center to the Glen Mills Schools outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He plans to get his high school diploma, then attend and graduate from college. Someday Evans hopes to start his own record label, to be called Omega Records. He plans to retire as CEO of the company. ■

deal with my inner self. I met a man by the name of Jack Jacqua, who helped me realize the reason I had returned to the hall. He would tell me, "Failure to plan is planning to fail!" I began to contemplate my life and my future for the first time. I noticed that when I took my first step out of juvenile hall after my previous stay, I had already planned to fail because I didn't have a constructive plan to ensure I would not return. After I came to this realization, I felt that I had solved my problem. I spent two months in San Francisco Juvenile Hall before I was released. I was a free man again and I was so happy! I thought that since I had learned what my problem was, I would never return. What I didn't realize, however, was that I was completely oblivious to the other problems that I had and I was not mentally prepared for freedom.

Eleven months later, I returned to the juvenile system for what was definitely my most serious crime to date—a carjacking with an unloaded weapon and a second charge of residential burglary. This time I was placed in a different Bay Area county facility, and this is when I began to see juvenile institutions for what they truly were. I began to notice the type of inmates I was surrounded by and soon realized that the majority were always black and brown. I also realized that the majority could not read or write past the junior high school level. I then focused on the employees of the system, who we refer to as "counselors." Many counselors were people who were deeply involved in their own lives, and, more often than not, their misfortunes and misgivings arrived at the job along with them. The counselors' bad attitudes often resulted in the cruel treatment of detainees. This kind of treatment was the norm and far outweighed the kindness of the few good counselors on staff. I began to feel that I was not being counseled. Instead, I felt like I was always being lectured for the things I had done in my past. I quickly came to the realization that the staff only showed up at work for a paycheck. I was convinced that no one cared and that the nice counselors were only nice because they wanted to work easier shifts! Experiences like these showed me that I can depend only on myself and that only I can create better situations for myself. After all, it's not mandatory for someone to guide me the right way throughout my life.

I have to admit that the thing that changed me the most was my observations of the juvenile institution itself. I began comparing the similarities and differences of all the institutions that I served time in. I noticed how one county's juvenile facility was clean and organized while another county's facility was dysfunctional and dirty. But the institution that really got under my skin most was the laid-back and

comfortable one! From the time I arrived at this particular institution with tears in my eyes, I was told, “Don’t worry, this is the best unit you can be in!” A couple of days later, I realized this as being the truth. Between the big-screen TV, the popcorn and sodas, Ping-Pong, chess, Nintendo 64, basketball, bingo every Friday night, and meeting the author Terry McMillan, I was almost deceived into believing that I wasn’t incarcerated at all! At first I registered this royal treatment as a coincidence, but as I grew older, I began to discover the truth. This is around the time I learned that “institutions” are the biggest moneymaking industry in California. Sometimes I wish that I could meet the man who started it all because he had to be pretty smart. Just think about it: What is the best way to legally turn minority youth into recidivists? Simple—by making institutions comfortable and easy to return to. This was all just a moneymaking scheme!

While I was sitting in that particular institution, I never thought about what I did, nor did I feel like I was being incarcerated. I was living carefree, without the need for money and also eating three meals a day, which was a major improvement! I have come to believe that, subconsciously, this is why people return. Most detainees eat three meals a day only on special occasions when they are “on the outs,” and their families cannot afford to buy things like Nintendo 64 and big-screen televisions, etc. Also, since most people commit crimes for money, it relieves a lot of tension to come to a place where money is not needed. I feel that this was the overall plan when institutions were first built and that their goal has been accomplished. The obvious irony, in my opinion, is that these institutions should be places where you don’t want to be, places that you never want to return to, places that are anything but comfortable. There should be less emphasis on entertaining you while you are incarcerated and more emphasis on preparing you to deal with stuff when you get out. Throughout my numerous placements, I realized that it got easier for my mind to deal with and accept incarceration. I recognize this as “institutionalization.”

Which brings me back to present day. After being transferred to San Francisco, I feel that I am now a much wiser person. I have begun to read a lot of books about different things in order to expand my horizons. I regularly attend biweekly meetings of the Omega Boys Club. Omega is a program in which ex-convicts and motivational speakers come in and talk to us, sharing their experiences of life in the system. This is helpful because we can see a reflection of ourselves in the future if we don’t decide to make a change in the present.

I am currently waiting to be sent to a reform school outside of Philadelphia by the name of Glen Mills. This program specializes in academics and provides opportunities to learn job skills while obtaining a GED or a high school diploma. I feel that this is the best place for me to be at this time. A lot of people put their careers on the line to see that I make it to Philadelphia. I really owe it to people like Jack and Judge Feinstein because they have given me the opportunity to really turn my life around. Now I realize that I have a lot to prove, and I know that I want to prove a lot. I have come to the final conclusion that there is no way possible to make a career in crime. After all, what's the point in trying to if you are not guaranteed a retirement plan? This is the last chance I will truly have to build my future as a young adult. If I don't take advantage, I can very well be throwing my life away! I refuse to make that fatal mistake.

What keeps me going is just imagining how proud my mom will be once I succeed. I remember my mother telling me a story about two men in the same jail cell after a rainy night. One man looked out and saw mud, the other man looked out and saw stars. I think it is my time to look out and see the stars.